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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the tenure of teachers in the South Western, North Western, and Sunshine Coast regions of Australia. These regions provide contrasts of isolation, climate, and apparent attractiveness. Research indicates that rapid teacher turnover in rural areas is a significant concern. Data collected since 1975 suggest that the average days of teacher service do not differ significantly across the three regions; however, teacher length of service was greater for the Sunshine Coast region when compared to the other regions. Teachers' average ages by gender on arrival and departure are older in the Sunshine Coast region, reflecting some returned teachers in the region. Data on applications for interregional transfer indicate that 16 percent of North Western and almost 16 percent of South Western teachers request transfers. The most sought-after region is the Metropolitan East with the Sunshine Coast being the second most popular preference of transfer. This study concludes that: (1) rural schools do not necessarily experience reduced educational outcomes as a result of higher teacher turnover; (2) larger urban schools may show deficits in the quality of student-teacher relationships even with lower teacher turnovers; (3) 2-3 year periods of service in rural schools are not necessarily disadvantageous educationally, as the enthusiasm of younger teachers may outweigh the advantage of longer-serving teachers; and (4) coastal/urban schools' teacher turnover rates seem higher than publicly perceived. (LP)

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Teachers' duration of placement in three Queensland regions: A discussion paper

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Considerable community and professional concern prevails regarding the perceived comparative brevity of tenure of teachers in rural schools. This discussion paper attempts to provide statistical data, some commentary and other opinion on the issue. Its purpose is to assist in attracting further research support for this theme and to inform the Country Area Program, distance education and the open access policy. Such research could examine the educational advantages of increased teacher placement stability in rural areas and strategies which may enhance such stability.

A brief overview of teachers' duration of placement in three Queensland Department of Education regions is undertaken. They are: South Western, North Western and Sunshine Coast regions (See Figure 1). These provide contrasts of isolation, climate and apparent attractiveness. Overall, the examination of such data may confirm or modify perceptions of teacher turnover and its possible impact upon rural education outcomes.

Selected Literature

The 'Quality of Education in Australia' Review Committee noted in 1985: 'rapid teacher turnover in rural areas as a significant concern' (p.148). Queensland Education Minister, The Honourable Paul Braddy, noted the desirability of 'continuity' at the 'Think Tank' on Research into Rural Education (p.62). He said, 'Currently, one of the major reasons why some teachers are reluctant to teach in these areas is that living is simply more difficult in these areas. What we are endeavouring to do is make life easier for teachers in remote areas and this will be done through providing either a cash or a non cash benefit. If more teachers are available to teach in these areas, then the standard of teaching is bound to improve. Ideally, teachers and principals should be staying in remote areas for a longer period, so there is greater continuity in the education of the children'.

In 'Schooling in Rural Australia' (p.139), the challenges to teachers are outlined: 'These involve their living circumstances, their relationships within the communities, the professional tasks assigned them in small schools, the level of professional support available to them, the financial implications of short-term or long-term service in remote schools, restricted access to their families and friends and the educational and social needs of their children'.

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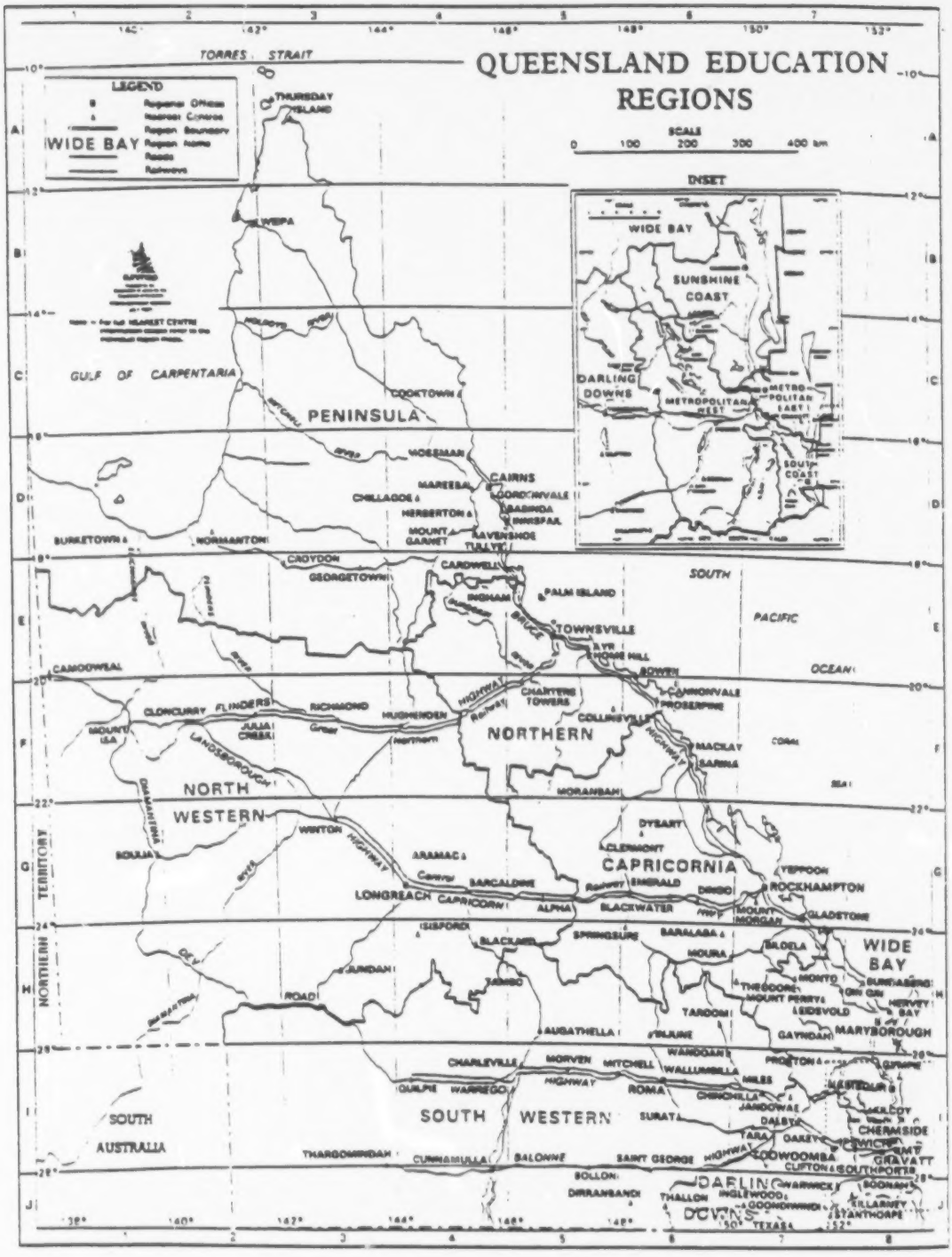
Figure 1: Queensland Department of Education Regions



Additionally, sets of community expectations may be placed upon teachers:

> Teachers should be enthusiastic about their task, well-educated and possess a range of teaching skills. As well, they should understand and be able to relate to rural communities and have a sufficiently broad grasp of their area of professional expertise to be able to integrate community interests and values and locally relevant materials into their teaching. Teachers should live in the local community rather than commute to it from a nearby centre and they should participate in local organisations and contribute to community life. They should act as appropriate role models for young people in the local area maintain appropriate standards of behaviour, both professionally and socially. Given that many teachers appointed to rural schools are young and relatively inexperienced and will have grown up and undergone teacher education programs in an urban environment, it is not surprising that many find that meeting these expectations can be a difficult task.

Already a picture is being painted of rural teaching as a daunting task. Expectations, challenges and pressures all in a setting of isolation and withdrawal from familiar sources of support and social interaction.

The Postle, Crowther and Walton report 'Needs Analysis of the Priority Country Area Program in Queensland', (p.8) highlights these issues in their findings that parents in rural areas are particularly concerned with:

- the preparation of teachers to teach in rural areas;
- the need for more experienced teachers to remain in rural areas;
- the length of time teachers spend in a rural school, and
- a significant number of teachers who indicate little interest in rural communities.

The Queensland Council of the Isolated Children's and Parents' Associations lists in its Policy Statement (June 1990, p.6), a range of objectives which recognise these needs and challenges:

- that teachers appointed to Distance Education positions be given appropriate induction courses, staff development programs and follow up inservice courses;
- that highly skilled teachers with a commitment to teaching in remote areas be appointed to remote schools;
- that teachers and administrators in remote schools have access to regular inservice courses;
- that suitable accommodation be provided for all teachers in remote schools;
- that an on-going program involving development of instructional techniques and materials be implemented to assist staff working in remote areas, and

- that positive incentives be given to attract teachers to remote high schools to ensure continuity of subject courses.

So there is a widely held perception that rural areas have high teacher turnover, that this is undesirable and that a range of measures should be taken to promote teacher stability.

Looking at the facts

Queensland' s Department of Education Western regions are frequently cited as having high teacher turnover. South-Eastern locations, on the other hand, notably the highly sought after Sunshine Coast region, are cited as having low teacher turnover rates. Is this the case and to what extent?

The series of figures presented are based on data collected since 1975. Figure 2 shows that teachers' average days of service across the regions do not differ that markedly. This may be explained by there being more occupational and locational alternatives in Sunshine Coast region. There, moves to nearby regions, non-government schools and non-teaching occupations such as small business, are much more readily available.

FIGURE 2: Average days in service for teachers who were once in the region

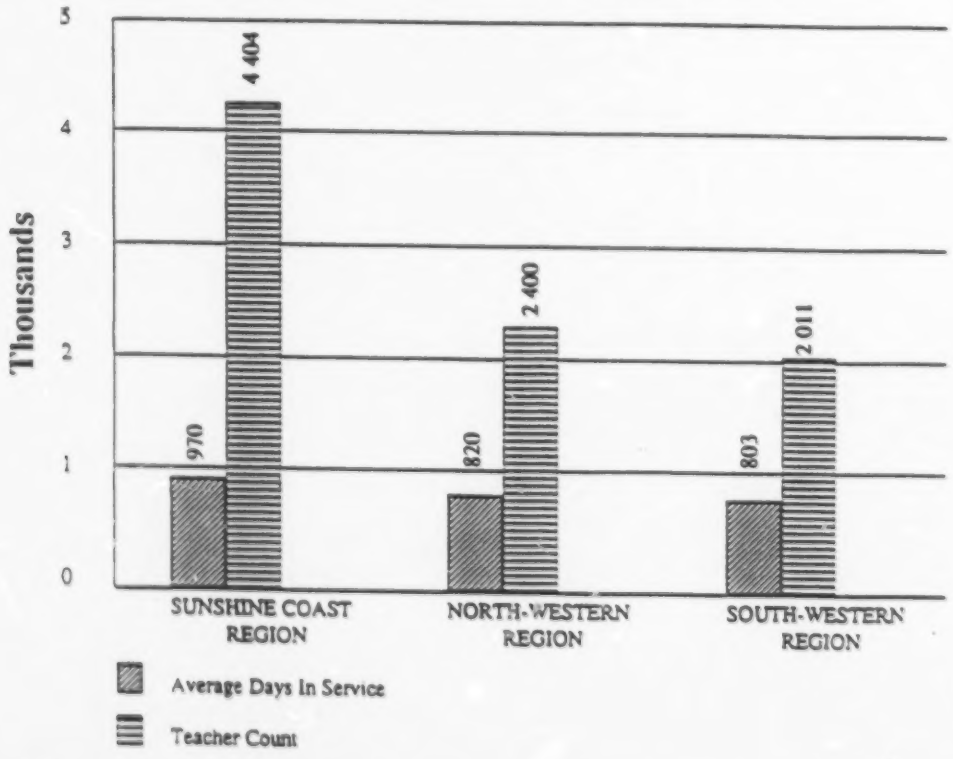


FIGURE 3: Average days in service in a particular school

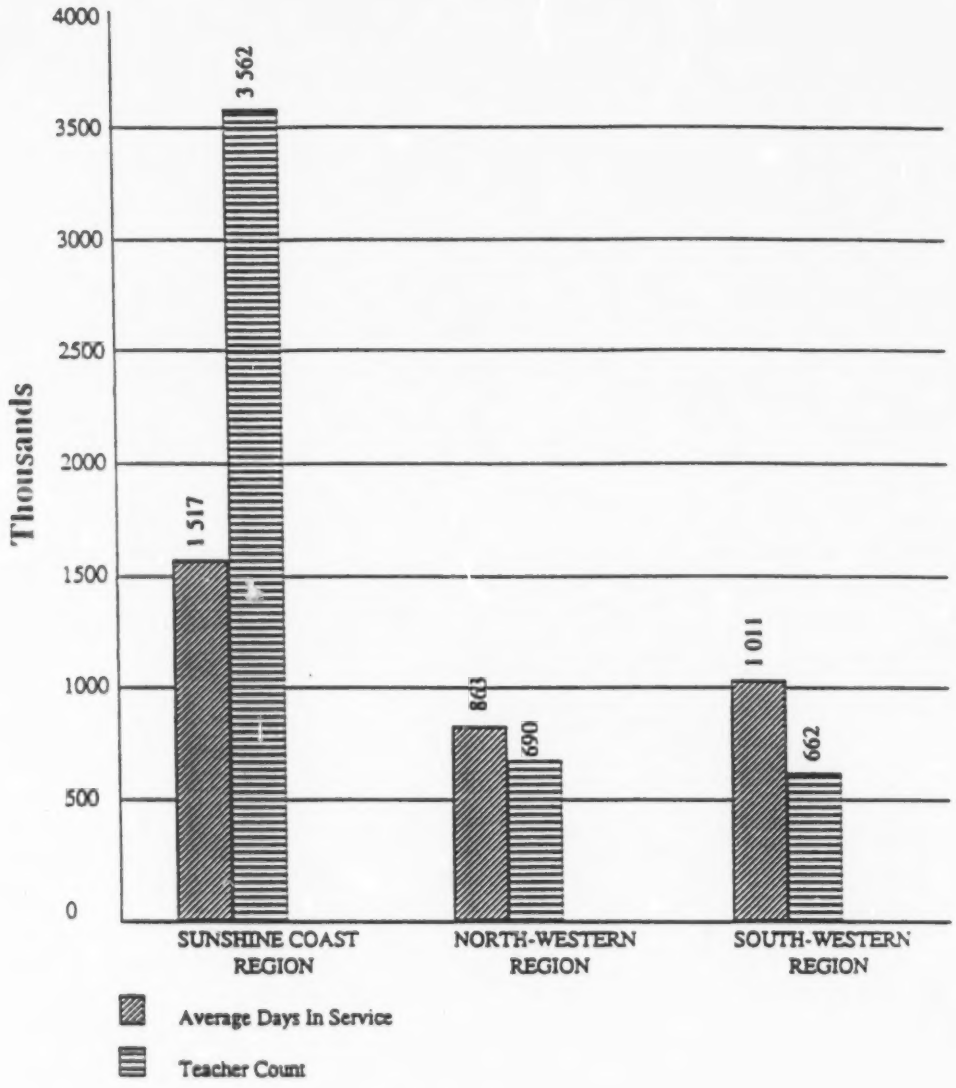


Figure 3 displays average days of service in a particular school. Here we see that greater length of service is evident in the Sunshine Coast. However, the gaps may not be as large as expected with the South Western region showing the average service in one school at almost three years. The stark isolation of many North Western schools reduces its figure to 863 days, still well over two years. One factor in reducing the Sunshine Coast figure may be the movement of younger teachers to facilitate the incoming of promoted and other teachers. Some recent graduates may serve for one or two years before possibly going North or West. South Western region shows longer service than North Western, possibly because it has larger centres and is less remote from Brisbane and the coast. The average arrival age of teachers in Western regions shows that they are, on average, of five years teaching experience. Predictably, returning teachers raise the average arrival ages for Sunshine Coast region.

FIGURE 4: Teacher's average ages by gender on arrival and departure

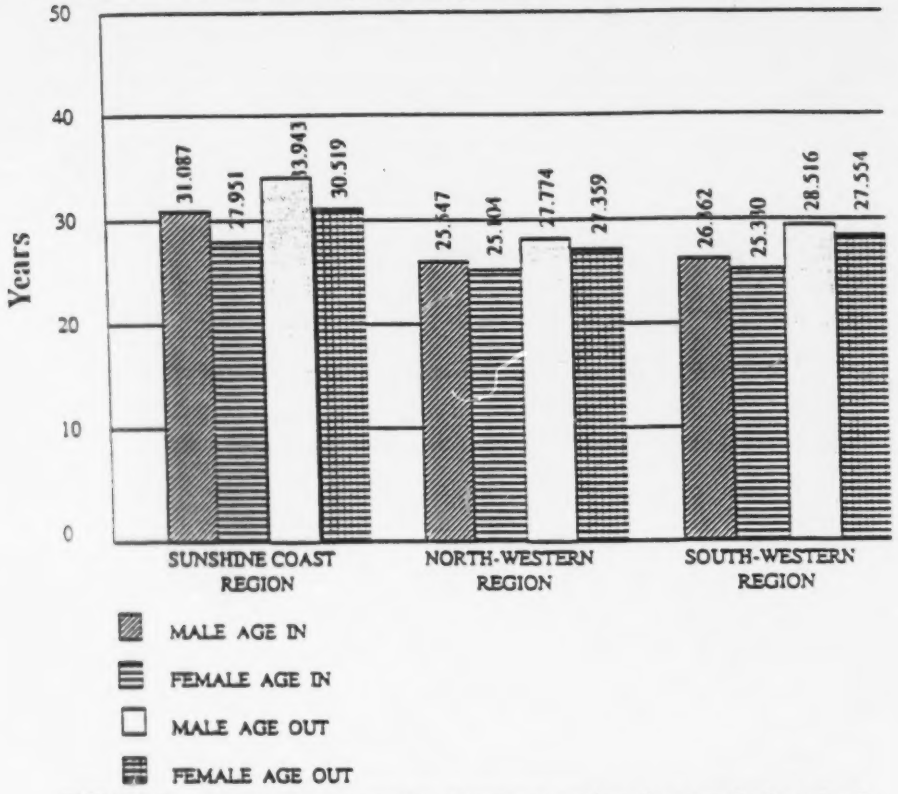
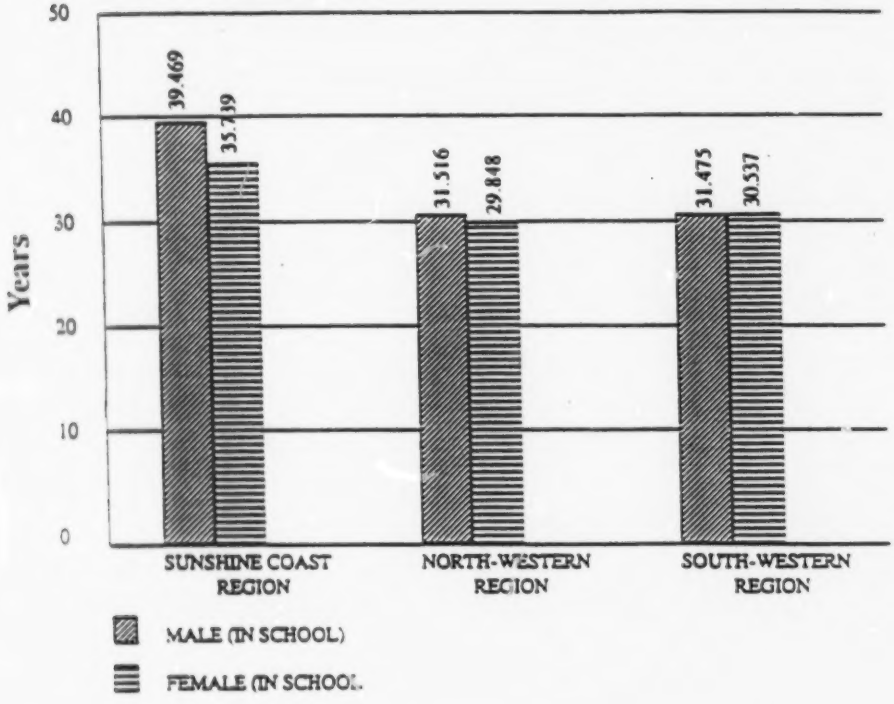


FIGURE 5: Average ages by gender of current teachers in a particular school



The populations considered here are teachers based at a school within the region NOW.

In recent times new graduates may have been more likely to accept rural positions thus reducing the average arrival age in Western regions. The higher arrival ages in Sunshine Coast region reflect the return to the coast of teachers usually planning to settle. This, as previous figures show, does not necessarily mean to settle into teaching at one (or any) school for an extended period. Females have an earlier arrival age in this region, possibly reflecting what has been a perceived unsuitability of some rural locations for women. There is evidence of females' greater preference for a return to the coast.

However, females settling at the coast may then have chosen to resign if that settling involved parenting. This is less likely today with more flexible leave options being available. In considering the average ages of teachers by gender in a particular school, the similarity in the Western regions is clear.

Which regions show greatest percentages of their teachers requesting transfers?
To which region do these teachers wish to be transferred?

FIGURE 6: Applications for transfer out of region

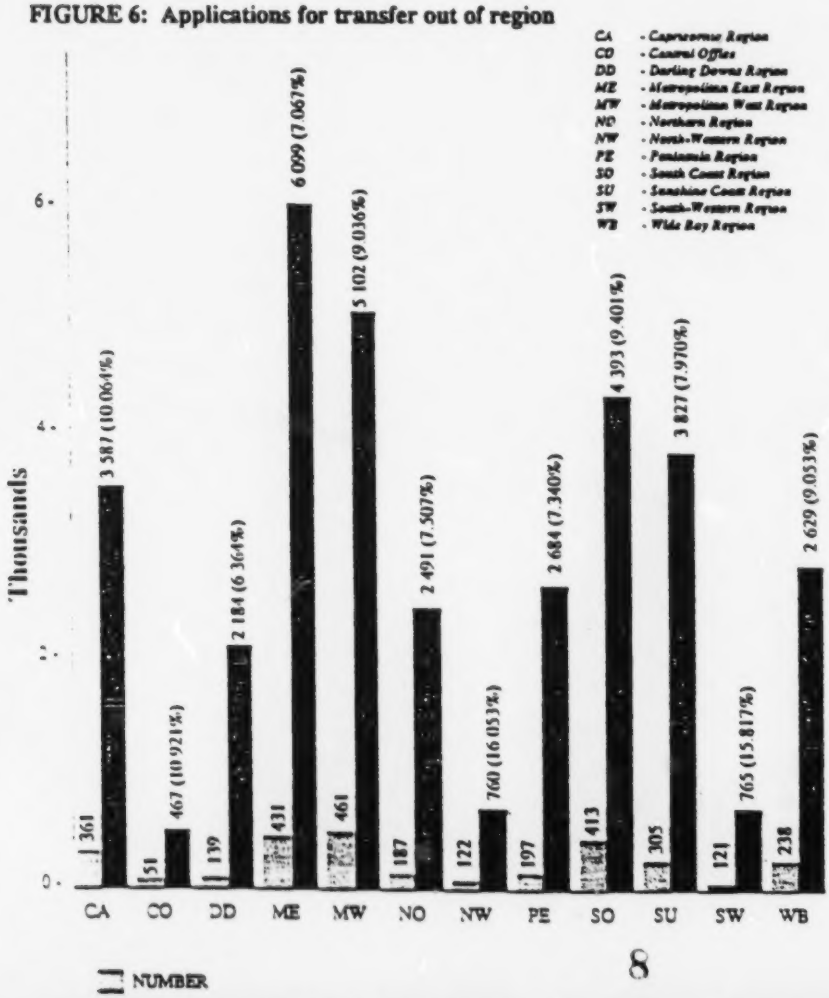
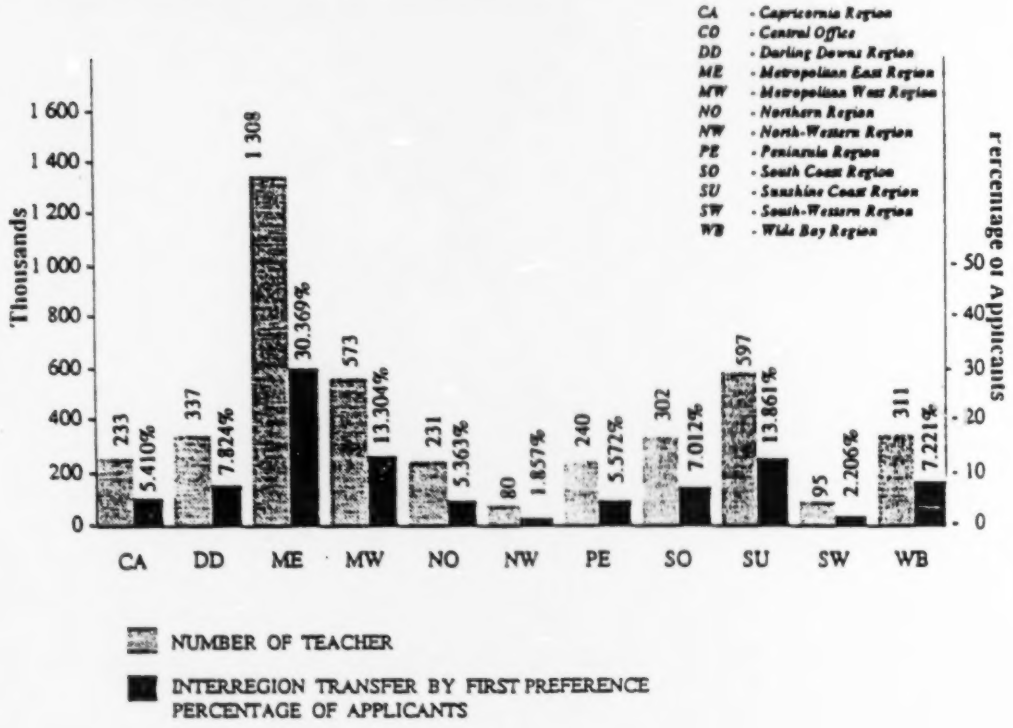


Figure 6 does not surprise in showing that 16% of North-Western's and almost 16% of South-Western's teachers requesting such transfers, yet this is lower than one teacher in six. The 'CO' line refers to the exceptional case of teachers' relocation from Central Office associated with the Department's restructuring. It is interesting to note the similarity of percentages requesting transfers across contrasting regions - Capricornia, Metropolitan West, South Coast and Wide Bay - all at 9%-10%. The lower figures of Darling Downs, Northern and Peninsula cover substantial numbers of rural, indeed isolated, schools.

The most sought after region is Metropolitan East (see Figure 7). This reflects not only its ready access to capital city services and coastal attractions, but its immense family and social connections for so many teachers. There is an important 'coming home' factor here along with the region's wide variety of school types, sizes and curriculum emphases. The much smaller Sunshine Coast region is second most popular. Yet as we have seen, this does not assure a proportional level of teacher placement stability. The expected gender balance in teachers is approximately 2:1 female:male. The ratio requesting North Western region is 4:1.

FIGURE 7: Interregion transfer by first preference



What are the reasons for this?

Almost the same pattern is found for Metropolitan West. Peninsula region on the other hand seems to be most attractive as a destination for males.

Conclusion

Educators readily acknowledge that sound outcomes are more likely with certain levels of teacher placement stability. Perhaps more significant is a practice of active teacher identification with the school community. A long term teacher in an urban setting does not necessarily closely identify with the local catchment area. If the rural call is for a continuity of teacher relationships with students it needs to be remembered that this is not always experienced in urban settings. The larger primary school usually means a different teacher every year - the norm anyway, across years and subject areas, in secondary schools. In a small rural community the impact of a shorter teacher stay is more noticeable. The departing teacher may have been a dominant participant in local matters. So, even though it may not be shorter than, say, an urban school period of service, it may seem a lot shorter. The often more personal and community-minded rural location is quite sensitised to alterations in its group network and social structure. We can observe that the comparatively prolonged stays in Western regions may result from a lack of local employment options. However, the opposite is the case in the Sunshine Coast Region and consequently teacher turnover is higher than might be expected.

Rural Principals of small schools are usually in service there for at least two years meaning that in the case of a one-teacher school it is unlikely for a child to have more than four teachers during the primary year. The larger primary school usually affords seven different teachers over seven years. Indeed there is a view that a change of Principal in a one teacher school after a three year period may have benefits for all parties. Certain urban schools experience much higher rates of requests for transfer than those of the Western regions. Requests for transfer from rural regions are not uniformly high. Nor are requests from well-serviced South East Queensland regions such as Metropolitan West and South Coast, particularly low. The accuracy of public perceptions of regions 'relative attractiveness' is, at best, erratic. The same may be said, but even more so, of perceptions of teacher turnover in relation to contrasting regions.

Summary

- Rural schools do not necessarily experience reduced educational outcomes as a result of higher teacher turnover;
- Larger urban schools may show deficits in the quality of student-teacher relationships even with lower teacher turnovers;

- Two to three year periods of service in rural schools are not necessarily disadvantageous educationally. The enthusiasm and vigour of younger teachers may more than outweigh the perceived advantages of having longer serving teachers in rural schools.

- Coastal/urban schools do not enjoy as low teacher turnover as may be publicly perceived.

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